

Tom LaVenture, *Asian American Press*

General Vang Pao passed away in a Clovis, California hospital on January 6, 2011. He was 81 years old and was reportedly battling pneumonia. The news has shocked a nation of Hmong, the former veterans who served with him in the War in Southeast Asia, a generation of American Hmong who have come to know him as an advocate in a new country and for the wellbeing of Hmong back in Laos and Thailand. These same people support the General two years ago when he was accused of organizing a military coup in Laos. The charges were dropped.

It had been the hope of local Hmong leaders to bring the body of Vang Pao to Minnesota to allow final viewings and goodbyes from the city he had visited several times each year. According to his close friend, Xang Vang, who said it was on the condition that the General's family would receive authorization for burial in Arlington National Cemetery.

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U.S. Congressman Jim Costa requested Vang Pao be granted eligibility for burial at Arlington National Cemetery. The letter, which was also signed by Congressmen Dennis Cardoza, Madeleine Bordallo and Tim Holden, was sent on behalf of the General's family to both Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki.

The visitation arrangements in Minnesota would have been a stopover. No word on the authorization was given from the family, however, the family has said a Minnesota trip would not be possible and that funeral services for the general will run February 4th until February 9th at the Fresno Convention & Entertainment Center in Fresno.

Candle light vigils will be held nightly from 6:00 p.m. to midnight at 1558 N. 9th Street in Fresno.

Blong Xiong, the first elected Asian American Councilmember in for the City of Fresno, and the first elected Hmong councilmember in Fresno and the State of California, was also appointed to the board of the California Volunteer Commission by Governor Schwarzenegger.

As a Fresno official, Xiong had come to know General Vang Pao and his family, and said whether an elder or a member of the in-between generation like him, everyone is feeling a great

loss in the community.

"For the last couple years we knew his health condition was poor, but even when it is expected this is a huge loss with someone of his stature and level to the entire Hmong community," said Xiong.

The Fresno community has had a difficult week, he added, and that it is too soon to tell what impact the mourning will have, as in the past when people worried for the General's health or wellbeing.

Given his age and the progression of the community, Xiong said people have come to realize they don't rely on the General as much to be their champion today. However, his leadership during a turbulent time in the past there is a "connectivity" that comes from expecting him always to be there.

The long term impact from the General's absence is "the million dollar question," said Xiong. "He is the last of his kind, someone who can translate across generational lines and has a name that commands respect and deference."

Mee Moua, the first Hmong American to be elected a State Senator in Minnesota, and who now works in Washington, said she was profoundly saddened at the news of the General's passing.

"This is a great lost not only to the Hmong American community, but to all around the world who are friends of our Hmong family."

Moua said for far too long, Vang Pao carried the burden of a proud people longing to be free and independent. From the day he became a young officer in the French army in Indochina, to his rise to become a general of the Royal Lao Army, and later as a proud American in the United States.

"Vang Pao has more than earned a well-deserved rest," stated Moua.

"As children of the Hmong American family, we mourn his passing, yet we wish him well on his journey, and may the path ahead of him widen, the winding roads straighten and any obstacles along the way cleared," she added.

"Even though he is no longer with us, the best way we can fulfill his legacy, as he often said to us, is that: We must always take care of each other and remember always, that we are one people, one family."

The new District 67 State Senator, John Harrington, is no stranger to the General. As a Saint Paul Police Officer and later Chief of Police, Harrington worked closely with the Hmong community on public safety, gang prevention and education issues.

"Over the years, both Major General Vang Pao and the Hmong of St. Paul have continually reached out their hands to me in friendship and have welcomed me into their community," said Harrington. "With sadness, I join the Vang family and my fellow Hmong-Americans in mourning the loss of Major General Vang Pao."

Harrington recalled the early days of the Hmong resettlement, and how a bewildered war torn people forced to leave their homeland began to start again into a new and strange community. Just three decades later, Harrington said he has witnessed the change from a cautious group of new arrivals to a thriving and contributing community.

"They have provided our community with many of our police, teachers, and civil servant professionals," he added. "They were also instrumental in reinvigorating University Avenue when many were afraid to invest in the neighborhood."

It was at the Fourth of July International Hmong Soccer Tournament at Como Park, that Harrington said he first met Major General Vang Pao.

"It was apparent when I met him that he was a well respected man," he said.

Harrington said the General was an important American ally in the Southeast Asian conflict and an important leader in the Hmong community. His steadfast presence and leadership both here and abroad make his death an historic tragedy for all those who loved him.

Lee Pao Xiong, director of the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University in St. Paul, said the General's passing is a great loss not only to the Hmong but to all Southeast Asians.

"For years, he kept the Communists at bay," said Xiong. "Because General Giep sent the North Vietnamese Army's best troops to fight against General Vang Pao's forces in Laos, that meant those forces weren't being used in South Vietnam or being used to invade Thailand."

Xiong said that in the more than 36 years since the fall of Laos, General Vang Pao has not wavered from a tireless advocacy for liberty and democracy which continued to provide inspiration and hope for countless Hmong and Lao in the United States, Laos and throughout the world.

"His love and passion for his people is something to be remembered," said Xiong. "Some may not agree with his political views, but I know they respect him as a leader and what he did in the home country."

"He commands great respect among many American GI's that I have met," he added. "Many lived because of his action. Without the Hmong and his leadership, over 50,000 American lives could have been lost in South Vietnam. Even the Hmong in Laos and Thailand mourned for his loss."

Xiong said that during General Vang Pao's final years, he wished for the Hmong to be united and to be good citizens of this country. He called upon the educated to come together to find a positive solution for the Hmong to both be contributing members of American society, while also establishing a unifying language and to have a better understanding and value cultural practices.

Xang Vang said the general had caught a virus from attending several Hmong New Year events over several days in Merced and San Jose, which varied in temperature and humidity. His breathing became labored as it turned into pneumonia and his family grew more concerned with his weak condition as he has had a heart bypass surgery.

Xang said the General was in critical condition on December 31, and he went to see him thinking it might be goodbye. He recalled that the general opened his eyes when he called to him and held his hand.

"I looked at him and I could see that his face started to rise a little bit to show he is happy," said Xang.

From that point Xang said he felt the General's health began to improve. The next day he was reassuring others that he was going to get well. On the third day his wife brought him some home cooked food and he started eating. The following day he was sitting up in bed and could get up for short periods.

As he felt better more visitors began to appear and this concerned the doctors, said Xang. He was put into a private with limited access to a few family members because of so much flu going around. They were also giving him heart medication for his heart.

On the sixth day Xang said the General began to feel tired at about noon, and his condition was reported as serious by mid afternoon. A short time later the nurses started to call people in from the waiting room and by 4:35 p.m. the General was gone, said Xang.

"He left fast, and we are all sorry. We asked him to stay with us and he could not."

The General's last mission was to get the federal government to recognize Hmong veterans for the purpose of receiving military benefits including burial rights at U.S military cemeteries.

With the Special Guerrilla Unit Veterans and Families USA, Inc., the General allied with several American veterans and Col. Bill Lair, the retired CIA officer who worked with Vang Pao in the early 1960s through the war. They began by creating forms to certify the service of veterans for the purpose of applying for veterans benefits if and when they are approved.

The Hmong Veterans Resolution was passed unanimously (80-0) by the California State Assembly last August, granting military burial honors in military cemeteries. It was sent to the President to sign, however, the federal legislation was not so well received.

U.S. House Resolution 5879, introduced by Congressman Costa last July would extend national cemetery burial benefits to Hmong veterans who fought with the United States in Laos during the Vietnam War. Xang said the bill did not get anywhere but that the General likely followed up with Costa in late 2010, and would expect that new legislation will be introduced this session.

"We believe strongly that U.S. Congressman Jim Costa will continue to sponsor the bill to help the SGU and the military service personnel in the Secret War in Laos," said Xang, who believes Vang Pao got the ball rolling on this and that enough people are on board to see it through.

During the Vietnam War, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ran a covert counterinsurgency operation in Laos that became known as the Secret War. From 1961 to 1975, approximately 40,000 Hmong individuals were recruited by the CIA to join this effort.

The SGU in Laos had three primary missions. The first was to rescue downed American pilots shot down between Vietnam and Laos. The second was to disrupt the supply route along the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North to South Vietnam. The third was to protect the radar stations that directed all American aircraft going to Hanoi and the far North Vietnam.

Following the 1975 communist takeover of Laos, approximately 130,000 Hmong soldiers and their families relocated to the United States as political refugees. Today, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 65,000 Hmong live in California, with the highest concentrations living in Fresno and Sacramento counties.

Seexeng Lee, a local artist and educator in Minneapolis Public Schools, last July created the "Hmong Icon" to honor General Vang Pao at the 4th of July Hmong Sports Tournament in St. Paul.

The 24K gold relief painting was meant as an 80th birthday from people across the generations that signed the work - but Lee was able to present it to him at the event.

Lee said there will not be another leader like General Vang Pao and that he will be missed. He said courage in battle has defined Vang Pao's legacy and his life will be long studied and honored by compatriots and historians in Laos and in America.

"There is no denying the fact that I, along with many of my fellow Hmong mourn the loss of a courageous and resilient warrior who at times has shown to all of us that he too is subject to human frailties," said Lee. "His death represents an end of an era for Hmong in America.

Oskar Ly, interim executive director, Shades Of Yellow, the Hmong GLBT organization in Minnesota, said SOY members are thankful they are able to experience and live the life based on what Vang Pao's commitment and contributions has achieved throughout the years.

"His leadership has helped lay the foundation that has enabled us to advance as a people as diverse as we are all over the globe," said Ly.

"On behalf of SOY, we honor General Vang Pao's life and significant role in the Hmong community," she added. "Our hearts go out the family, friends and all mourning his loss across the world."

U.S. Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-4) on the passing of General Vang Pao on January 7, entered a statement into the Congressional Record, recognizing the Hmong military leader and his lifetime of service to his people and loyalty to the United States, forever immortalizing his memory in the Library of Congress.

McCollum said General Vang Pao was an historic Hmong military leader who led his people against communist forces during a turbulent time in Laos from 1961 to 1975. In this country, she said he served as a civilian leader who continued to lead the Hmong-American community for nearly four decades.

"My heart-felt sympathy goes out to General Vang Pao's family and to all the Hmong- American families in Minnesota and across the U.S.," McCollum stated. "Over the years, I had the honor of joining General Vang Pao at many events such as: the Hmong American New Year celebrations and the July Soccer Festival celebrations in St. Paul, as he had always come to the Twin Cities to join the Hmong community for those events."

McCollum was also present with General Vang Pao at the October grand opening of the Hmong Village Center in Eastside St. Paul.

"Although frail from his failing health and sitting in his chair, the General was in good spirit and spoke eloquently to a large gathering crowd at the celebrations," she added. "Sadly, this was the last time I saw him."

McCollum said General Vang Pao's influence has touched the Hmong-Americans deeply, and that she knows the community will continue to share and cherish the memories of his legacy for future generations to come.

U.S. Senator Al Franken (D-MN), said both he and his spouse, Franni, join Minnesota's Hmong-American community in mourning the passing of General.

"We send our sincerest condolences to his family," state Franken. "General Vang Pao was a leader in the Hmong community who provided critical leadership during an important time in history."

The family of General Vang Pao wants the public to be aware that the only official Memorial



Fund is arranged with Wells Fargo Bank because of its convenience nationwide and its past work with the community.